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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAGHDAD 000532

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/01/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [IZ](#) [KU](#)

SUBJECT: KUWAITI FM'S VISIT TO IRAQ: SHORT ON SUBSTANCE
BUT LONG ON SYMBOLISM

REF: A. BAGHDAD 518

[B](#). BAGHDAD 410

[C](#). BAGHDAD 125

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Patricia Butenis for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

Summary

[1](#). (C) Summary: Ending 20 years of senior-level bilateral estrangement, Kuwait's Foreign Minister visited Iraq February [26](#). In his meetings with Vice Presidents Abdul-Mehdi and Hashmi (President Talabani is in Iran) and Prime Minister Maliki, and over lunch with Foreign Minister Zebari, the Kuwaiti welcomed improved relations. The Iraqis reciprocated, with Prime Minister Maliki forcefully asserting both publicly and privately that Iraq would never again threaten Kuwait. Not much substance appears to have been covered during the symbolically important visit. However, the two sides agreed to establish a senior-level joint commission to comprehensively deal with the range of issues that impinge on their complicated bilateral relationship, including debt relief, compensation, and border maintenance. The commission's first meeting will be in Baghdad, possibly as soon as the end of March, chaired by the Kuwaiti and Iraqi Prime Ministers. End summary.

Historic Kuwaiti Visit

[2](#). (C) Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed al-Sabah visited Baghdad February 26 -- the first senior-level Kuwaiti visit to Iraq since 1990. A pleased Foreign Minister Zebari told the Charge February 28 (other topics reported Ref A) that the four-hour visit had gone smoothly. Dr. Mohammed met separately with Vice Presidents Abdul Mehdi and Hashmi, then with the Prime Minister, and concluded his visit with a Zebari-hosted lunch at the MFA. Zebari noted with some exasperation that he had tried to get both Vice Presidents to meet with Dr. Mohammed together, but they refused. Dr. Mohammed conveyed a letter from the Amir to President Talabani on follow-up to the January Kuwait Summit to Abdul Mehdi, since he is the senior Vice President. Zebari said he had stressed the need to resolve the debt and compensation issues as soon as possible; delaying decisions will only make things harder. He said his Kuwaiti counterpart had agreed, but was "fed up" with the Kuwaiti parliament, which the GOK might suspend.

[3](#). (C) Speaking of the Iraqi-Kuwaiti relationship more broadly, Zebari recounted a "hostile tone" in a recent GOI interministerial meeting apparently held to review the state-of-play on negotiations on a number of bilateral issues, including shared oil fields, border maintenance, the Safwan border crossing, and compensation issues (see Ref B). Zebari said his colleagues, including the Ministers of Justice, Interior, and Finance, and the Prime Minister's Legal Advisor, were unhappy with how the negotiations were progressing and complained that the MFA (i.e., Zebari) was being too accommodationist and exceeding its brief with the Kuwaitis. Zebari pushed back, insisting that his mandate was

to establish "good, professional" relations with Kuwait. He said he would take the issue to the cabinet for a policy clarification if need be. Zebari also confirmed Dr. Mohammed's public announcement that a joint commission would be established to deal with the full range of bilateral issues. Zebari noted that he will organize these meetings, "so you know it will be safe." (Comment: Zebari's report of anti-Kuwaiti sentiment in the GOI is harsher than we have heard from many other contacts. End comment.)

¶4. (C) The Charge urged that Iraq appoint an ambassador to Kuwait. The appointment would build on the positive momentum QKuwait. The appointment would build on the positive momentum engendered by the Foreign Minister's successful visit as well as reciprocate Kuwait's posting of an ambassador to Baghdad. Zebari agreed but did not elaborate. (Note: the MFA long ago forwarded the name of a proposed candidate to the Prime Minister's office, which has yet to take action. Relations between Maliki and Zebari -- and between the Prime Minister's Office and the MFA -- are poor. End note.)

Positive Media Coverage

¶5. (U) The visit received positive coverage in the local media. It was the third story on al-Iraqiya's (Iraqi national TV) February 26 evening newscast. The three-four minute segment highlighted the historic nature of the visit and how it represented progress in the two countries' efforts to improve their relations, which were soured by the previous regime. It aired the Prime Minister's statement that "Iraq should no longer be linked or viewed in relation to its previous leadership, as some Arab countries still do, but rather as a democratic country, as proved by the provincial elections." The report also featured laudatory commentary from a Political Science Professor at Baghdad university, who noted it was a good start for (improved) relations between the two countries. Al-Hurra ran a similar but shorter piece; it also noted that the compensation issue was one of the issues discussed during the meetings.

¶6. (U) The Prime Minister issued a statement saying that post-Saddam Iraq sought "security, stability, (and) construction, not weaponry or dictatorship." Noting that "the problems we (now) face are leftovers from the former regime," Maliki affirmed that "There is no way to return to the policy of war and adventures...Iraq today is based on a constitution and democracy. Iraq has changed. The bad image is over, no more terrorism, no more al-Qa'ida." The Iraqi press highlighted Maliki's comments and, in generally accurate and balanced coverage, stressed Iraq's important regional role and improved Iraqi-Kuwaiti ties. The debt issue figured prominently in the press coverage, with commentary from analysts that Iraq should not have to pay for the mistakes of the Saddam-era government.

The View from Kuwait

¶7. (C) Kuwait's Ambassador to Iraq Ali Mou'min told Senior Advisor Gray March 1 that while the Foreign Minister did not get into the bilateral weeds on contentious issues, his historic visit was a symbolically important milestone that has opened a new chapter of Kuwaiti-Iraqi relations. The debt and compensation issues were touched upon but not discussed in detail. Much of the discussion was on follow-up on the Kuwait Summit, including determining how funds should be distributed to the Palestinians (current thinking is through the Islamic Bank). Al-Mou'min shared his impression that the Iraqi political leadership genuinely wants to put the painful bilateral past behind it. He pointed to Maliki's forceful public and private statements that Iraq would never again threaten Kuwait as well as the roaring success of the Kuwaiti National Day reception he hosted at the Rashid Hotel on February 25, which 460 people attended. He said the event received positive media coverage in both Iraq and Kuwait,

including interviews with Iraqi politicians and parliamentarians. Al-Mou'min said the expressions of goodwill he received from his Iraqi guests seemed "honest and genuine."

18. (C) Al-Mou'min said he would propose to his Prime Minister that the first meeting of the joint commission take place after March 24, thus ensuring Kurdish leader availability in light of the March 20-22 Nevrouz holiday. He said the joint commission would deal with the full range of Iraqi-Kuwaiti bilateral issues, from security to commercial. Al-Mou'min the delegation would be headed by the Prime Minister and include at least the Ministers of Finance, Interior, and Commerce. He predicted that after the Prime Minister's visit, "lots of things will happen." Al-Mou'min hoped the debt issue would not hold other issues hostage. He recounted that during their meeting on the margins of the Kuwait Summit the Amir told President Talabani that the two could discuss anything but the debt issue, which he could do nothing about -- it was in the Kuwaiti parliament's hands. Al-Mou'min doubted the Kuwaiti parliament would pass a law abrogating Iraqi debt. Qabrogating Iraqi debt.

19. (C) In response to S/A Gray's question whether Dr. Mohammed and Maliki discussed appointment of an Iraqi ambassador to Iraq, Mou'min said no, but noted that he had heard that Bahr al-Aloom Sadeq was under consideration. Speaking off the cuff, Mou'min said he hoped the Iraqis would send a Christian or a Kurd, thereby obviating the inevitable GOK debate over what sort of Arab the incoming ambassador was.

Comment

110. (C) Shortly after his arrival last fall, Ambassador Al-Mou'min told us his plan was to crawl, walk, then run as he sought to normalize Kuwaiti-Iraqi relations. With the success of the gala Iraqi national day reception (billed in the English-language invitation as the "Liberation Day" reception) and the warm welcome given to the Kuwaiti Foreign Minister, we would say both sides are getting ready to walk. We note that Dr. Mohammed's visit, originally schedule to coincide with Kuwait's February 25 national day, was moved to February 26, the anniversary of Kuwait's liberation from Iraqi occupation in 1991. That the Iraqis went along with this strikes us as another indication of the GOI's determination to open a new chapter with Kuwait. The formation of a high-level joint commission to deal in a comprehensive way with the full range of bilateral issues will likely enhance prospects for progress, which both sides appear to want. End comment.

BUTENIS